WONDERS OF PAST AGES

Scientific Exploration of the Casa Grande

LARGE PRE-HISTORIC CITY

Expedition of the Smithsonian Institute Under Dr. Fewkes.

In the heart of the Southwest, in a region formerly forsaken by whites and little frequented by Indians lie the traces of an ancient city buried by desert sands. Many tumbled walls smoothed flat with the burning plain are marked, grave-like, by the still remnants of a building. In the Gila Valley, Arizona, this lone ruin, christened the Casa Grande by the Spaniards of the Territory, has since October been the object of investigations, under a special appropriation of Congress, by an archaeological expedition of the Smithsonian Institution.

The Casa Grande is twelve miles from the Santa Fe system of railroads and eighteen miles from the Southern Pacific—an easy trip across the desert from Florence, Arizona. It has furnished material for much surmise and recently, for actual scientific investigation—surmise dating back to the gold-seeking invasion of Coronado in 1540.

The ruin has been brought three times to the attention of our national legislative body. It lies upon public lands and is therefore under national control. Early, however, it paid the price of many valuable relics by suffering from the too devoted attention of souvenir hunters. About fifteen years ago Congress recognized its importance by appropriating $2,000 for its repair and preservation—following upon private investigations which at the time aroused much general interest. Victor Mindeleff, archaeologist, was sent to supervise the construction of a guard against the wear of the elements, and a custodian was appointed to protect it against too curious sightseers. Last year Casa Grande again brought an appropriation—this time $3,000; and for the fiscal year ending 30, 1908, a like sum has been granted.

As provided by the terms of the more recent appropriations, the work was placed under the supervison of the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, and Dr. J. Walter Fewkes of the Bureau of American Ethnology was chosen as the most available member of the Smithsonian staff to undertake the excavations. He set out on October 17, arriving on the scene October 24, and since then has accomplished appreciable results.

A live description of the spot is given by one of the predecessors of Dr. Fewkes. He says:

"The Casa Grande ruin (the single standing building) is located near the southwestern corner of the group, and the ground surface for miles around it in every direction is so flat that from the summit of the walls an immense stretch of country is brought under view. On the east is the broad valley of the Gila River., rising in a great plain to a distant range of mountains. About a mile and a half to the north a fringe of cottonwood trees marks the course of the river, beyond which the plain continues, broken somewhat by hills and buttes, until the view is closed by the Superstition Mountains. On the northwest the valley of the Gila River runs into the horizon, with a few buttes here and there. On the west lies a range of mountains closing the valley in that direction while toward the southwest and south it extends until in some places it meets the horizon, while in other places it is closed by ranges blue and misty in the distance."

The accounts of visitors to this particular ancient town on the banks of the Gila River trickle along the course of time ever since white men landed in this "new world."

When the adventurous members of Coronado's expedition in 1540 braved the scorching sands of the north Mexican desert, they halted in amazement at the ruins of a long-deserted, sand-topped city hiding the secrets of a people older than the Indians. Castaneda, the scribe of the invasion, wrote with appreciation of the relic of a supposed fortress which had been destroyed long before by barbarous tribes, perhaps ancestors of the Apaches. In 1694 a Jesuit father, wandering in penance, chanted a mass within its walls, recalling the spirits of departed chiefs of whom we are left no written record. While the white colonists of New England in 1775 were struggling to throw off a yoke binding them to Europe, an ecclesiast, Padre Font, was living in a room of the Casa Grande, writing of the deeds of a nation whose prestige had already waned at the approach of a mightier tribe:

In 1846 an "Army of the West" of this advancing mightier tribe conquered these tottering walls and the territory surrounding them. Lieutenant Emory and Lieutenant Johnson of this army saw and wrote of the ruins, and Major John Russell Bartlett later described them with admiration. Mr. A. F. A. Bandelier, traveling for the Archaeological Institute of America, was next to mention them in notes on a trip as far south as Central America. These accounts were followed by a partial report in 1888 by Mr. Frank Hamilton Cushing of the "Hemenway Southwestern Archaeological Expedition from which the party returned laden with specimens of many carved stone implements, highly decorated pottery and burial urns, but above all with a vivid description of the customs of the extinct people of the region. In settling up affairs of this expedition Dr. Fewkes came into actual touch with the archaeology of this part of Arizona.

The Hemenway explorations were general. The work of Dr. Fewkes is limited to the buried city about Casa Grande, which he firmly believes, as he writes to the Smithsonian, will be one of the great spectacles of the region—"an American Pompeii for sightseers as well as an object lesson for students of American archaeology and history."

"The Casa Grande group of mounds" he says, "is composed of three walled clusters of buildings or compounds now for the most part buried in the earth." In his reports he has labeled them compounds A, B, and C. "Compound A' he is excavating. 'Compound B' is close at hand. He describes it writing from his tent upon the grounds: "It is a noble ruin and as I see it now looming among the mesquite trees I fancy the stately building that someone, some day, will uncover there."

Dr. Fewkes has already unearthed much of the first group of structures in which stand the walls of the "great house." As the sand is dug out, the mystery of its meaning gradually clears. It can hardly be a massive temple of sun-worshippers, as a former traveler surmised, but is more probably a place of refuge, a stronghold in which there may have resided a powerful chieftain of by-gone days who exacted homage from his vassals. The group proper is slightly over four hundred feet long by two hundred feet wide surrounded by a solid wall of pressed earth a yard or more thick and now from eight to fifteen feet high. On two corners have already been unearthed an eight room bastion and a two room lookout. The great house itself rests about the center of the enclosure, flanked by plazas and groups of smaller houses arranged on an ordered plan. On one side is a large opening, probably the entrance, and about the whole, outside the wall, run traces of a ditch which connects at one corner with an adjacent depression in the ground.

Beyond the walls are mounds of all sizes and shapes—mounds which prodding has proved to be of as many origins. There are mounds of earth left from clearing out springs. There are mounds formed of ashes and debris. The larger ones are burial mounds—treasure houses for the archaeologist—rich in mortuary offerings and human remains. There is a fourth class of many remains of "ultra-urban single houses" which may hold the solution to the make-up of the whole city.

What sort of people were these first Americans who have left only silent evidence of their pre-Columbian life? It is established that they were ancestors of the Indians— that they bore little resemblance either to Asiatic or to Africans. Wherever they came from originally, they must have been Americans for a large total of generations. Closely allied to the Pima tribe of the present day, conservative estimates would place their number well up into thousands in each city.

It has been a pet theory of ethnologists to account for these vast western ruins by a series of many occupations of the same site, marking each return by the construction of a "temple" or "gathering place" or "compound," as Dr. Fewkes has termed these large blocks of buildings. One relic at least speaks of a vast population in words that are clear—the net work of irrigation ditches constructed from the Gila and Salt Rivers. Dug, as they must have been, with crude stone implements, the dirt was then laboriously carried away in baskets strung across the backs of the women. Imagination will conjure up the number of workers necessary to complete in this manner a ditch found by Mr. Cushing traceable at least calculation for thirty-eight miles.

All the Arizona investigations of the Smithsonian Instituton are being conducted with scientific caution. Much of the labor is performed by Indians who are perhaps the descendants of the very men whose homes they are unearthing. Such relics as have been discovered will be carefully shipped to the National Museum to be compared by experts with other specimens of Indian work. Dr. Fewkes has reserved his own conclusions until the completion of the excavations, when whatever definite theories he may have established will be embodied in a complete report on the Casa Grande and its vicinity.

One of his most recent letters to Secretary Walcott says:

"I believe the excavation and protection of the ruins on the Casa Grande Reservation may be made the most important archaeological work the Smithsonian has ever undertaken and if completed as begun will be a valuable contribution to the 'advancement of knowledge among men.' Allow me to emphasize one feature of the archaeological work of the Smithsonian at Casa Grande this winter. So far as I know up to the present year no museum, institution, or private worker has ever done anything to protect and preserve walls of buildings in southwestern ruins, brought to light by excavations, but have left them to be destroyed by the elements.

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